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# A Conception of Philosophical Progress

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# A Conception of Philosophical Progress

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## Abstract

There is no consensus about appropriate philosophical method that can be relied on to settle philosophical questions and instead of established findings, there are multiple conflicting arguments and positions, and widespread disagreement and debate. Given this feature of philosophy, it might seem that philosophy has proven to be a worthless endeavour, with no possibility of philosophical progress. The challenge then is to develop a conception of philosophy that reconciles the lack of general or lasting agreement with the possibility of philosophical progress. I present such a conception in this paper. I argue that the aim of philosophy is to resolve philosophical problems, which is different from establishing settled and final answers or positions. Philosophical problems involve inadequate or incongruous conceptions that cannot be settled once and for all but can be resolved by transforming our conceptions so they are now congruous and adequate. There is philosophical progress every time a warranted, defensible position is developed that resolves a philosophical problem, even if there are competing resolutions and further problems to resolve, as there always are in philosophy.

It is possible to raise and solve philosophical problems with no very clear idea of what philosophy is, what it is trying to do, and how it can best do it; but no great progress can be made until these questions have been asked and some answers to them given (Collingwood, 2005, 4)

Philosophy involves endless controversy seemingly without settled, definitive conclusions. Multiple conflicting interpretations, positions and arguments are offered, but with no consensus about which should be accepted. There is not even agreement about which are the legitimate questions to ask, or the appropriate methods to employ. This picture leaves no room for philosophical progress and so makes philosophy appear pointless. But this is perplexing given how many people pursue philosophy, both

formally and informally, and who seem legitimately satisfied by what is achieved. The problem then is how to reconcile the view of philosophy as irrevocably contestable with the view that there can be philosophical progress. To resolve this problem I will present a conception of philosophical progress that, I argue, is compatible with the lack of settled, definitive conclusions in philosophy: We make philosophical progress by moving from philosophical problems to philosophical resolutions, and the various products of philosophy such as questions, positions and arguments, are milestones in the overall progress to an as yet unknown resolution. In other words, philosophical progress occurs whenever we transform an incongruous or inadequate conception so that it is now congruous and adequate and the original problem no longer occurs. This is progress, even though we have not reached a final settled position free from defensible competitors or from further problems and improvements.<sup>1</sup>

## **I. The available positions on philosophical progress**

I argue that there are three positions that could be taken about the possibility of philosophical progress, given the seeming inevitability of philosophical controversy:

*Idealistic:* We make progress as we (eventually) get to the truth. This typically Platonic or Hegelian position holds that philosophy makes progress towards final, definitive answers. Peirce's (1934) pragmatist view that 'truth' would eventually emerge from an inquiry that lasted long enough is also idealistic, as is Habermas' (1972) similar view of truth as ideal consensus.

*Pessimistic:* This position holds that there is no philosophical progress because philosophy only produces endless change and disagreement. William James' view that philosophy merely expresses the tastes and temperaments of philosophers is pessimistic about the possibility of philosophical progress, as are sceptical or nihilistic positions where philosophical questions and answers are taken to be meaningless, unsolvable or illegitimate. There are also a range of pessimistic positions based on strong psychological, historical or sociological explanations of philosophical agreements and disagreements.

*Realistic:* Philosophy produces something of epistemic value, but not final, definitive conclusions. This position, typical of Nicholas Rescher's 'orientational pluralism' (1978, 2006), holds that there can be philosophical progress, contra the pessimistic view, but it offers a realistic conception of what philosophy can produce, which is different to the idealistic view of progress. Under a realistic conception, philosophical progress occurs when there are tentative, changing, pluralistic philosophical advances that are more than subjective improvements, but less than absolute truths.<sup>2</sup>

I argue that idealistic and pessimistic conceptions of philosophical progress should be rejected in favour of realistic conceptions (and that these should not be confused with philosophical idealism or realism).

I reject idealistic positions because they set standards that are impossibly and unnecessarily high, while ignoring the legitimate, achievable, epistemic products of philosophy that indicate progress. If we judge progress in an idealistic manner, because we do not have independent access to the truth we cannot measure the distance between our current conception and the true conception, so we cannot verify if we have made progress. This is a poor conception of progress because it makes progress unknowable while ignoring other epistemologically valuable products of philosophy that could be used to judge progress such as extensions or clarifications of positions, and what Moody (1986, 45) calls a necrology of failed positions and arguments.

I also reject pessimistic conceptions of philosophical progress because they set standards for judging philosophical progress that are unreasonably and needlessly low (actually having no epistemic standards at all), while ignoring the same achievable epistemic products of philosophy that idealistic positions ignore. Pessimistic positions start with the assumption that progress could only occur by reaching the truth, but because we cannot have, or verify if we have, philosophical truth, they draw the conclusion that therefore we cannot have anything of epistemic value, only subjective opinions. Because this ignores the achievements of philosophy that could be used to indicate progress, this is also an inadequate conception of philosophical progress.

Instead, I advocate a realistic position. Philosophical progress is best understood in realistic terms such as by making new distinctions and devising new positions rather than in terms of settling issues and finding the truth of the matter. I argue for the realistic position because it is in greater equilibrium with our important conceptions about philosophy, while the other positions are needlessly inconsistent, as discussed above. I am not arguing that idealistic or pessimistic positions are not possible as conceptions of philosophical progress, or that they are false. I argue that in the face of philosophy's inability to produce settled truths, the idealistic and pessimistic conceptions are poor ways to understand philosophy and philosophical progress and the realistic conception is better. It supports the view that philosophy can result in epistemic achievements, explains why philosophy is a sensible endeavour to pursue, and makes better sense of our past and current pursuit of philosophy.

### *Some objections and replies*

In this sub-section I consider a number of objections to my endorsement of the realistic position about philosophical progress. These objections attempt to show either that

philosophical progress must be defined in terms of the truth, or that philosophical progress is impossible.

One objection might be that I have only considered straw-men versions of idealistic and pessimistic positions and ignored the more nuanced versions that philosophers actually advocate. For example, by employing epistemic criteria such as logical coherence or absence of fallacies we could have a legitimate idealistic position for judging progress on the path to truth, or a legitimate pessimistic position for judging progress despite the absence of truth.

In reply I argue that such sophisticated positions only present legitimate conceptions of philosophical progress because they are surreptitious realistic positions. Under these positions we make progress as we achieve such things as the removal of a fallacy or the development of a coherent position, but these are *realistic* criteria for judging progress. The idealistic claim to 'Truth' or the pessimistic claim that there are no universal, impartial standards, are merely irrelevant battle-cries or unnecessary statements of faith with no epistemic substance in relation to philosophical progress. It is the realistic criteria that do all the work.

It might also be objected that truth functions as a necessary regulatory ideal for philosophical inquiry, so it cannot be ignored. In reply, I argue that improving philosophical conceptions (or as I argue later, resolving philosophical problems) is a better regulatory ideal, a better goal for philosophical inquiry, and it makes better sense of the philosophical enterprise. For example, if I claim that realism is the best position and you claim idealism, relativism, anti-realism or even scepticism is the best position, we cannot resolve the dispute by appealing to 'the truth of the matter', as one of the things we are disagreeing about is whether there can be such a thing as a 'truth of the matter'. This example is better understood as a dispute about the best conception to hold, and truth is not the appropriate standard with which to mediate this dispute. In line with my arguments above, we are better to understand *all* philosophical disagreement in this way.

A final objection might be that 'truth' is the only valid epistemic criterion, so if realistic criteria do not appeal to truth then they cannot be epistemically valid. Epistemic criteria are valid only to the extent that they approximate to the truth – for example, the simpler, more justified explanation that leads to greater predictive success is only epistemically preferable because it is more likely to be true. But under the realistic position I advocate, truth is not a consideration, so the objection is that there is no epistemic foundation for any realistic criteria I might propose.

My reply is that it is a mistake to make truth the sole epistemic criterion. Truth is perhaps a necessary criterion for judging if we have certainty, or if we have settled an

issue in a definitive way. But to understand epistemic philosophical progress we are better to consider the relation ‘epistemically better than’ rather than ‘epistemically settled’. The valid epistemic criteria for one conception to be ‘epistemically better than’ another are different from those needed to settle an issue. For example, I argue later that a philosophical conception can be epistemically better than another if it resolves a problem that exists in the other conception, even if it does not settle the issue. In other words, a congruous, adequate conception is an epistemic advance over a previously incongruous or inadequate conception, irrespective of the question of truth.

Despite this initial rejection of idealistic and pessimistic positions about philosophical progress, I will revisit them in a postscript at the end of this paper. Once the realistic position is fully developed I will argue that there is a back door through which idealistic and pessimistic positions can return in a different form.

## **II. The problem-resolution conception of philosophy**

A realistic conception of philosophical progress must show how the epistemic aims of philosophy are realistically achievable and distinct from reaching final truth. I argue that what I call the problem-resolution conception of philosophy provides such a conception. Under the problem-resolution conception, and in the spirit of Goodman and Elgin’s (1988) reconception of philosophy, when we philosophise we aim to resolve problems, not find truths. There are similarities between resolving problems and finding truth just as there are between Australian Rules, Rugby, and Gridiron, but, to extend the metaphor, they are different games with different rules, methods of play and most importantly, ways of scoring. In philosophy we score by resolving philosophical problems, not by reaching settled truths. There is philosophical progress every time a warranted, defensible position is developed that resolves a philosophical problem. This is a score in the philosophical game, even if it is a tentative and fallible position which raises other potential problems, and even if there are legitimate alternatives. There is also progress as we move closer to scoring a goal, such as by asking new questions, producing new positions and arguments, extending and clarifying positions and rejecting failed positions. These are the philosophical equivalents of conversions, penalties or gaining possession of the ball.

The philosophical problem of freewill provides a classic illustration of philosophical progress under the problem-resolution conception. The problem occurs because of an incongruity between our conceptions of freedom and determinism. Being free seems to require that what we do is not caused or made to happen by something outside our control. The scientific world-view, however, seems to imply that everything that happens, including what we think are free choices, is determined by forces outside our control.

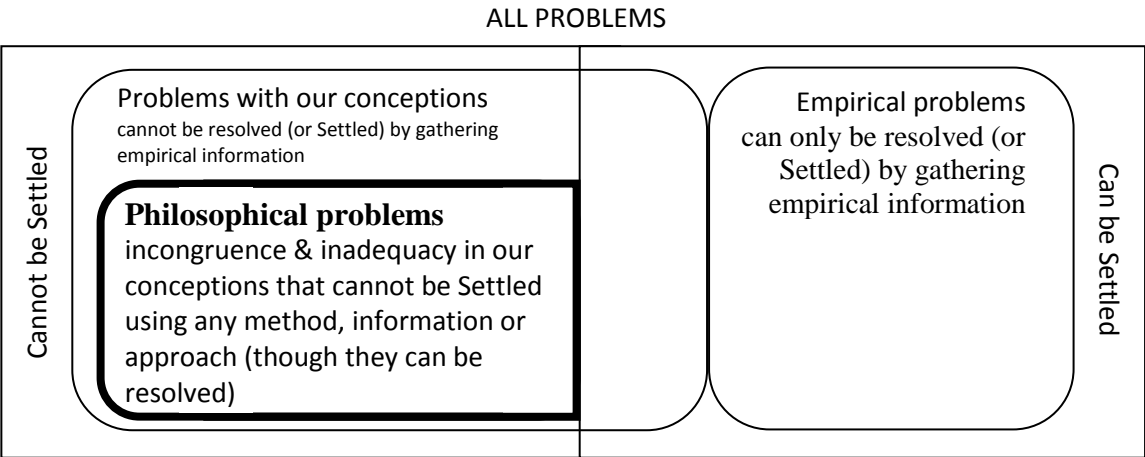
We live our day-to-day lives doling out responsibility and praise and blame, without worrying too much about excuses. We believe ourselves to be happily in control, sometimes. But then something gives us pause. We find we can't quite keep together our picture – there seems to be bits missing, or bits that don't fit. We cannot keep together our conception of ourselves as free agents, motivated by thoughts and reasons, with an alternative but equally powerful conception of ourselves as creatures of nature, part of the everyday causal flux. We need to restore harmony, and this is where the philosophy becomes hard (Blackburn, 2006, 109-110).

The apparent incompatibility of these two conceptions is the philosophical problem that we need to resolve. One way we might resolve this problem is by taking a compatibilist position and transforming our conception of freedom so that it is compatible with our choices and actions ultimately being determined by outside causes. This resolution takes an action to be free when done from our own beliefs and desires, even if our genes or environment have determined these. If we take this position we have made philosophical progress because the original problem has disappeared under the new conception of freedom which is compatible with determinism. A second option for resolving the problem is to reject the idea of freedom entirely, transform our view of human agency, and take a hard determinist position. If we take this position we would also make progress from the original problem because the original incompatibility between freedom and determinism also disappears by removing the concept of freedom. In these two ways we resolve the philosophical problem and make philosophical progress, even though we do not have a final, settled perfect position that can be proven to be the one 'true' position.

In the following three sections I will elaborate the problem-resolution conception that I advocate as a viable conception of philosophical progress. Under this conception, philosophical progress occurs when we move from philosophical problems to philosophical resolutions, so I need to say more about what counts as a philosophical problem and then what counts as a philosophical resolution, which I define in terms of the removal of a philosophical problem. In these sections my focus is firmly on philosophical progress, and even though I give examples of problems and resolutions from other disciplines, I am only making claims about philosophical progress. It may be that progress in other disciplines can be understood according to a problem-resolution model, where different disciplines have their own characteristic problems which require different kinds of resolutions, but I will not explore this further in this paper.

III. Philosophical problems

Philosophical problems involve inadequate or incongruous conceptions which cannot be resolved by gathering empirical information, nor can they be given final, uncontroversial resolutions, regardless of the methods or approaches used (see Figure 1, which will be explained and elaborated throughout this section). This implies that philosophical problems are different from empirical problems, although equally authentic.<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 1:** Simplified diagram of the relationship between philosophical and other kinds of problems

*Conceptions that fail*

Philosophical problems arise when we conceptualise the world and find that these conceptions fail to ‘make sense’ or ‘hang together’ in an objective sense (not because we lack information, nor because we have a subjective feeling of doubt).<sup>4</sup> Because they are conceptual, philosophical problems remain after we have all possible information. For example, even if I know everything about the history of different societies and have an accurate account of the psychological and sociological consequences of different systems of social organisation, the philosophical problem of what counts as a fair society will still remain. This is unlike currently unresolved empirical problems, which could be resolved if further empirical information became available.

Some ethical issues about what should be *done* and how we should *be* also count as philosophical problems because they arise because our *conception* of how we should act and be does not provide clear or coherent directions. For example:



The problem of whether we should eat meat occurs because our conceptions of animal rights and the value of animal life are ambiguous about whether we are required to be vegetarian, or whether it is sometimes permissible to eat meat.<sup>5</sup>

There seem to be two different but related types of philosophical problems: they can involve an incongruence or inadequacy of our conceptions.

### *Incongruent conceptions*

Philosophical incongruence includes philosophical dilemmas and inconsistencies, and the most extreme versions are paradox, contradiction or incoherence. Rescher calls these philosophical problems “aporetic clusters” which are “a group of contentions that are individually plausible but collectively inconsistent” (2006, 17). There are at least four related sources of philosophical incongruence:

1) Some incongruities arise because there are multiple conceptions of an issue that are each seemingly legitimate but inconsistent with each other. For example:

Biology may present one conception of ‘human nature’, psychology another and religion a third.

2) Other incongruities arise from a clash between our conceptions and our experiences. For example:

We normally think that being free is good, but we sometimes feel happier being told what to do. Alternatively we might think that ‘happiness’ is doing what we want, but then find that we are unhappy when we follow our whims for too long.

3) We can also have incongruous implications of our conceptions. For example:

We think that freedom should be preserved, but understood as a categorical imperative, this leads to problematic implications. Do we allow people to smoke in public, thus taking away the freedom of others to a smoke-free environment, or do we prevent smoking in public thus taking away the freedom of smokers? We seem required to do one or the other, but the implications of either are incongruous with our conception that freedom should be universally preserved.

Our theories may imply counter-intuitive implications which we are reluctant to accept. For example, our theory of ethics may require us to perform actions that we think are unfair or unjust.

4) A final source of incongruence is when our personal conceptions do not logically cohere. We can believe two or more things that both seem correct but which cannot be correct together. For example:

We might have a pro-life world-view, including being vegetarian and pacifist, yet we also believe that abortion is permissible.

### *Inadequate conceptions*

A second type of philosophical problem is when our conceptions are imprecise, incomplete or inadequate. Russell's interpretation is that such philosophical problems occur when our beliefs and assumptions do not provide conceptual unity and "system" (1998, 90). We resolve these sorts of problem by bringing order, precision, illumination and completeness to our conceptions. There are at least five related sources of philosophical inadequacy:

1) One type of inadequacy is when we lack a full or comprehensive conception of an issue or practice. This is the focus of much of the 'philosophy of ...' approach. For example, we have a philosophical inadequacy if:

Our view of art cannot tell us whether the rocks stacked by tourists at the base of Aoraki/Mt. Cook count as art or not.

2) A second source of inadequacy is related to practical conceptions about how we should live and what we should do. This is the sort of philosophical problem that Dewey and Rorty argue philosophy should concentrate on. For example:

We may find ourselves doing things we regret because we do not have a conception of what sort of person we should be to give integrity to our actions. We might be confronted with widespread social inequality but none of our repertoire of possible conceptions shows us how to alleviate this situation.

3) Another source of philosophical inadequacy arises when we find no justification for our basic beliefs or when we do not understand what Paul calls "the most basic what and why of things" (1994, 409). This is the source of philosophical problems according to the Beardsleys (1965) and the basis for the conception of philosophy as the discipline for finding what it is reasonable to do and believe. For example:

We might hold that human life is intrinsically valuable, yet have no satisfactory justification.

4) A fourth source of inadequacy is if our conceptions have unjustifiable implications, such as when they lead to injustice (Marx), or exemplify the status quo, dogma and ideology (Foucault and Derrida). For example:

We may find ourselves with a conception of sovereignty that privileges white interests above those of indigenous people.

Our conception of knowledge may be conservative and be implicated in right-wing economic theories while unjustifiably excluding communal theories of intellectual property.

5) The final type of philosophical inadequacy occurs when our lives do not make sense to us. Although all philosophical inadequacy involves conceptions that do not make sense, this is the broadest type, involving personal, existential, and 'meaning of life' problems. They are the focus of the therapeutic approach to philosophy, or philosophy as consolation, which stems from Boethius. For example:

We might find that the traditional values, beliefs and ways of life no longer give sense and direction to our lives.

I might describe myself according to the work I do, but the problem remains of who I really am.

### *UnSettleable*

Philosophical problems are also unSettleable (with a capital 'S').<sup>6</sup> They cannot be given an uncontroversial, unique resolution in principle, no matter what method or approach is used. We can Settle whether  $12 + 12 = 24$  by application of mathematical methods, and Settle whether a bowling ball will fall faster than a feather (under normal conditions) by application of scientific approaches and experimental methods. But we cannot Settle philosophical problems because either: i) the methods and approaches that can Settle other types of problems (such as surveys, experiments and calculation) do not apply to philosophical problems; or ii) if they do apply, they provide useful input, but leave room for legitimate argument; iii) The legitimate application of philosophical approaches and methods (such as counterfactual reasoning, logical analysis, thought-experiments, or distinction-making) leads to multiple defensible but contrary philosophical resolutions; or iv) these provide only one possible method or approach in competition with other equally defensible methods and approaches that yield different results (for example, applications of the categorical imperative or the utilitarian calculus to an ethical problem).

*The classification of philosophical problems is not clear-cut*

Although there are clear, central cases of philosophical problems, as I have presented, the distinction between philosophical and other problems is not clear-cut and there are fuzzy edges, borderline cases and ambiguities. I will briefly touch on these here, but not fully elaborate them.

It is difficult to pin down philosophical problems because the distinction between philosophical problems and other problems is not the same as the distinction between philosophy and other disciplines. Every discipline addresses several kinds of problem.

Philosophy sometimes addresses problems which are not philosophical in order to resolve philosophical problems. For instance, in applied ethics, before we can resolve the philosophical problem of whether euthanasia is permissible in a particular case, we must first resolve the empirical medical problem about the patient's likely prognosis. A second example is simple problems of logic which can be given uncontroversial answers using established methods such as propositional logic. The question of which logical principles or systems should be adopted is a philosophical problem, but "What follows from 'if A then B' and 'if B then C'?" does not have the same character and seems to be Setttable. A further example might be problems that require the uncritical application of a philosophical theory. For instance, the problem of whether Kantianism allows me to pretend to be sick so I can miss work would not count as a philosophical problem if it can be Settled by applying the categorical imperative (as it can under some readings of the categorical imperative). This is different from the philosophical problems of whether Kantianism is an adequate method to resolve ethical issues or whether it is ethically permissible to pretend to be sick to miss work.

Conversely, philosophical problems are not limited to philosophy. Other disciplines sometimes address philosophical problems, such as whether history is fiction or whether atoms are real. Even though historians grapple with the status of their discipline and physicists investigate the ontological nature of their theories, when they do so they are not using the methods of history or physics on empirical problems, but are seeking philosophical resolutions to philosophical problems.

There may also be borderline philosophical problems. The most complicated, theoretical problems addressed in many disciplines seem to involve inadequacy and incongruity in our conceptions that may go beyond what the established procedures can Settle. This also leads to the question of whether any problems addressed in any discipline can be Settled in the sense of having a unique, final solution. I assume that simple empirical problems such as 'how many people are in the room?' can be Settled, and that if this sort of problem cannot be settled, then nothing can, but I leave it an open question to what extent empirical problems can in fact be Settled. My claim is simply

that philosophical problems are conceptual not empirical and they cannot be Settled regardless of what empirical information has been gathered.

#### IV. Philosophical Resolution

We resolve philosophical problems, and thus make philosophical progress, by replacing the incongruous and inadequate problematic conceptions with newly congruent and adequate conceptions. Kekes (1980, 115) puts this in a different but insightful way. A resolution:

is an interpretation which provides a possible way of thinking about a segment of reality. Interpretations can be thought of as issuing a conditional: if you think of reality in this way and act accordingly, then what was previously problematic will no longer be so.

Resolution of a philosophical problem is similar to what is commonly called taking a philosophical ‘position’, however a richer picture is what Goodman calls “world-making” (1978, 101). We resolve philosophical problems by making a world anew: composing a new conception or ordering, supplementing, deleting, dividing, emphasising or weighting different aspects of a conception.

In this section I will elaborate the conception of philosophical resolution. I start by considering the main features of a philosophical resolution: it is a conception that has been transformed so it is back in reflective equilibrium in an objective sense, and not merely subjectively thought to be resolved. I then show how this conception of philosophical resolution forms the heart of a conception of philosophical progress that is compatible with the lack of Settled and definitive conclusions in philosophy.

##### *Transformed, in reflective equilibrium and objective*

Resolving philosophical problems involves a gestalt shift where the previously problematic situation is experienced as adequate and congruent. For example, consider the philosophical incongruity between praising honesty while requiring our children to say they liked the presents they hated. If we transform our conception of honesty to ‘telling the truth as long as it is not offensive’, or re-evaluate honesty as less important than politeness, it is possible to, without contradiction, hold honesty as an important value and also believe that children should tell their grandparents that they liked their inappropriate presents. We have not gained ‘truth’ or a Settled position immune to further improvement, but the original incongruity no longer occurs in this transformed conception.<sup>7</sup>

Although philosophical resolution involves a transformation of our conceptions, this need not be radical, nor involve an incommensurable discontinuity between the previous conception and the transformed resolution. Sometimes we resolve a problem by fixing a small ‘crack’ in the conception, such as replacing an overstated proposition with one that is more modest. Even such a minimal change can transform the whole conception so it now works, ‘hold water’ or allows us to ‘stay afloat’. For example, replacing ‘tradition’ with ‘culture’ or ‘cause’ with ‘justification’ are minor changes that nevertheless transform our conceptions so we can resolve problems in social philosophy and epistemology. Alternatively, we might resolve a problem in a more fundamental way, through a paradigm shift. For example, Kant’s development of the conception of the ‘thing-in-itself’ resolved a number of philosophical problems by radically transformed our conception of the world.

The transformation of our conceptions is from a conception that is out of equilibrium (a philosophical problem), and to a reconception that is back in equilibrium again (a philosophical resolution).<sup>8</sup> More specifically, a resolution is in greater *wide, intersubjective, critical* reflective equilibrium. A resolution is more congruous with, and adequate to account for, the *wide* range of extra-mental rational considerations, rather than just being more consistent with our personal intuitions or beliefs. A resolution is in greater reflective equilibrium with *inter-subjective* defensible perspectives, rather than just being a subjective matter. It is more inclusive of all defensible perspectives, and hence less biased and partial, and is either tempered directly in the forge of social criticism or supported by and tested against intersubjectively settled methods and standards which have themselves been tempered in the forge of social criticism. A resolution is also the result of *critically* evaluating, rejecting and self-correcting some elements of our conceptions, or some of our rational considerations, rather than merely making coherent the existing elements of our conceptions and our current settled knowledge and standards.

This means that resolving a philosophical problem is not a kind of radical relativism, constructivism or subjectivism, nor is it merely making our personal conceptions internally coherent. Philosophical problems arise when our conceptions are objectively out of equilibrium, and are incongruous with, or inadequate to account for, some of our rational considerations such as our experience, warranted knowledge, defensible conceptions, or standards of logic and reasoning. We resolve these problems by adapting our conceptions so they are objectively congruous with, and adequate to account for, these rational considerations. We judge our resolutions against what Dewey calls “extra-ideal, extra-mental things” which are independent of our subjective preferences (1977, 3). If a conception is inadequate to account for, or incongruous with, these external considerations, it fails to count as a resolution (irrespective of whether I believe it is resolved, or whether it is personally expedient, enables me to psychologically cope or is subjectively satisfying). Putting it colloquially, the extra-

mental considerations provide objective checks and balances and keep our resolutions honest.

*Resolved is different from Settled, but still counts as warranted progress*

My argument in this paper is that moving from philosophical problem to resolution is a defensible conception of philosophical progress, despite the absence of Settled, definitive, unique conclusions in philosophy. ‘Settlement’ involves reaching a final, unique position on an issue – sometimes described as getting ‘the truth of the matter’. Many have claimed that because philosophy does not ever seem to Settle anything, that there is no philosophical progress. My aim has been to show how lack of Settlement is no barrier to philosophical progress. To back up this claim I have to show how resolving a philosophical problem, in the sense I have described it, is: 1) different from Settling a problem; 2) counts as an epistemic advance and hence progress despite lack of Settlement; and 3) can be objectively warranted or justified despite lack of Settlement.

1) The resolution of a philosophical problem should be distinguished from Settling the problem. We can resolve philosophical problems by producing a newly congruent and adequate conception, but this does not provide a final and unique Settlement of the problem for two main reasons.

First, other defensible alternatives are always possible, as there will always be a plurality of legitimate resolutions to philosophical problems. This is because, to take a lesson from Quine’s holism, there will always be multiple ways to reconceptualise problematic conceptions so they are congruent and adequate.

Second, philosophical resolution is not a final state where all doubts are dispelled, all questions answered or all lines of inquiry exhausted, because a resolution can always be refined to get, for example, greater discernment or insight, or a conception that is in greater reflective equilibrium with our total set of rational considerations. Every philosophical resolution not only dissolves the original problem and moves us forward, but it will also be the source of new problems and thus indicates further possible progress. Rescher proposes a fundamental law of philosophical development on this basis: “Any given philosophical position, at any particular stage in its development will, if developed further, encounter inconsistencies” (2006, 81). It is impossible to “dispel all the problems, answer all the questions [or] resolve all the difficulties. Inconsistency keeps breaking in on us” (2006, 76).

Although resolution is different from a unique or final Settlement, it can be described as a ‘settlement’ of a problem in the sense that Dewey (1938, ch1) uses this term: A philosophical resolution is a fallible, revisable conclusion to a competent inquiry, that

we are warranted to use for further inquiry. We have removed the original problem, so it counts as settled, even though we have not reached a final, unique position and it does not count as Settled.

2) Resolving a philosophical problem is philosophical progress even though this does not involve Settling the problem. We make philosophical progress by transforming incongruous and inadequate conceptions so they are back in reflective equilibrium again. This is an epistemic advancement from previously incongruous and inadequate conceptions, even though there are multiple competing philosophical positions. Put in a slightly different way, we make progress as we move to conceptions that are in greater wide, intersubjective, reflective equilibrium with the total set of our rational considerations, and this can be achieved without finding the one correct position.

3) The justification for a resolution comes from bringing a whole conception into a mutually supporting equilibrium. A resolution is justified when “its components are reasonable in light of one another, and the account they comprise is reasonable in light of our antecedent convictions about the subject at hand” (Elgin, 1996, ix). This Quinean, holistic view of justification is better thought of as the integrity of our conceptions rather than their foundation. Like the hull of a ship, the various elements of our conceptions keep the structural integrity of the whole so that it remains afloat. The warrant for a philosophical resolution is therefore that it is in integrity with the majority of our fallible, rational considerations, not because it is supported by a few infallible foundations. In fact, because it seems impossible to have infallible foundations for our conceptions, the best possible justification that seems available is by bringing all reasonable knowledge, methods, standards, judgements and other extra-mental rational considerations into mutually supporting reflective equilibrium (Daniels, 1979, 278; Neilson, 1995, 235).

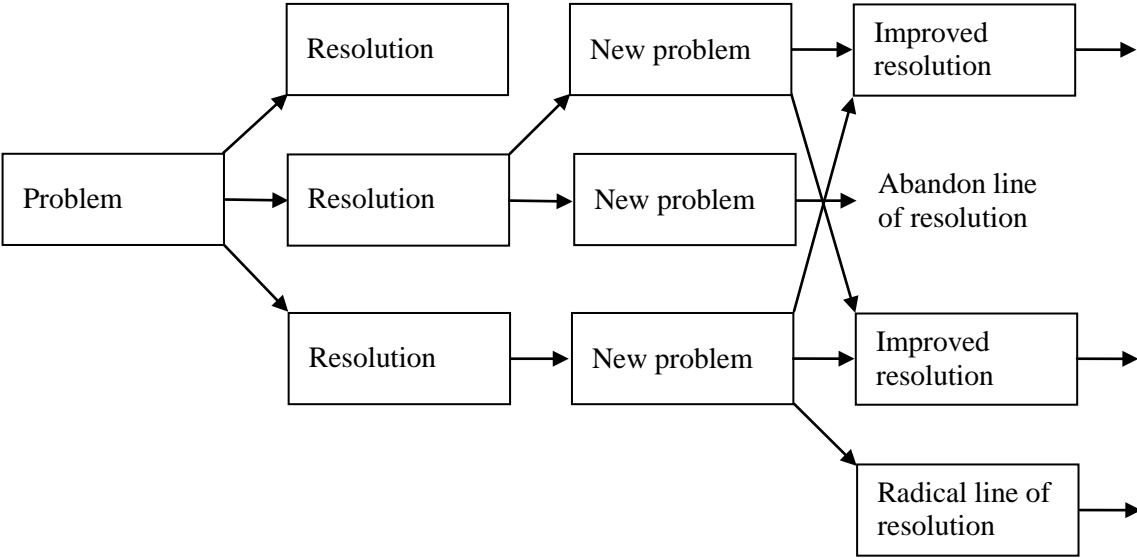
A philosophical resolution can be warranted or justified as an epistemic advance, and hence count as progress, without having to prove it to be the one uniquely true conception, and without having to rule out all other possibilities as false. A resolution is epistemically warranted because it is congruous with, and adequate to account for, a greater number of our rational considerations than the problematic conception it resolves. It can be warranted as a resolution of a problem even though it may later become the source of a new philosophical problem when we discover that it is incongruous with, or inadequate to account for, some of our other rational considerations, and even if there are multiple warranted resolutions. The rational considerations we appeal to when resolving a problem keep us from going astray and justify our resolution, even though they do not determine one final Settled resolution.<sup>9</sup>

## V. The problem-resolution conception of philosophical progress



In this penultimate section I elaborate the conception of philosophical progress that I have presented, and finish with some illustrations of philosophical progress.

Philosophical progress occurs dialectically - we resolve problems, only for the resolutions to become the source of new problems to resolve. The original problem arises as an incongruous, inadequate conception and we resolve this problem by developing more congruous and adequate conceptions. However, more advanced problems arise in the new conception, such as previously unnoticed problems, more subtle variations of previous problems, or even new information that shows the resolution to be problematic. In response we might develop yet more congruous and adequate resolutions. Alternatively we might abandon a line of resolution that we judge to be fundamentally in error, or develop radical resolutions that were not previously available.<sup>10</sup> Although we may return to the same sorts of problems and lines of resolution, we are making philosophical progress rather than merely going around in circles or following philosophical fads, because we develop more and more adequate and congruous conceptions and more and more sophisticated problems. Each arrow in figure 2 indicates philosophical progress.



**Figure 2:** Diagram of philosophical progress from incongruous, inadequate, problematic conceptions to multiple philosophical resolutions that are more and more congruous and adequate

To illustrate the process of making philosophical progress, consider the development of materialist and dualist positions about the mind. We might initially make progress by identifying a problem about how mental descriptions, especially about the

phenomenological aspects of consciousness, resist materialist explanations. We then make further progress by taking a dualist position which solves this philosophical problem, where the current materialist alternatives could not. However, as we discover further problems that arise because of a growing incompatibility between the dualist position and a scientific conception of the world, we might argue that although we made progress by developing the initial dualist position, we can make more progress by adopting a more sophisticated functionalist-materialist position. This is progress because, in comparison with the dualist alternative, materialism resolves more philosophical problems, not just those about the mind, is congruent with more of our most important, settled rational considerations (especially the scientific conceptions), leads us to reject fewer of these considerations, and leads to a more fruitful research program addressing new problems in cognitive science and AI. We have not proved materialism true and dualism false, nor have we ruled out more sophisticated dualist positions, but we have made progress first by identifying a problem, then adopting dualism which resolved this initial problem, and then by identifying new problems in this position and adopting a more sophisticated materialist position as a resolution to these new problems.

The problem-resolution conception of philosophy is exemplified by the explicit philosophical method of key, influential philosophers, and by many of the characteristic moves made in philosophy. On this basis I claim that the problem-resolution conception is a fitting way to conceptualise philosophy, though I do not attempt to prove that all philosophy takes this problem-resolution form:

The Socratic conception of philosophy presents one example of the problem-resolution conception, and the Socratic aporia, as illustrated in the *Euthyphro* (11b) and the *Republic* (VII, 524e) is one source of the conception of philosophical problems.

In Hegelian philosophy the problem is the clash of a thesis and antithesis and the resolution is a new synthesis that reconciles the two. Once synthesis is reached, this becomes a new thesis that is contrasted with a new antithesis, and the dialectic begins again at a higher level.

For Wittgenstein, a philosophical problem is an illness of our language (1972, §6 & 71; 1991, 1.132, 1.109) which we resolve (or cure) by avoiding inappropriate use of language (1961, 6.521) or incongruous questions (1991, 1.133). Alternatively, the problem is not knowing our way about (1991, 1.123), and the resolution is being able to navigate anew. In both cases we resolve the problem by making it “completely disappear” (1991, 1.133)

For Descartes the philosophical problem was whether we can trust any of our knowledge, and the resolution was the foundationalism of the *Cogito*.

One of Mill's problems was an inadequate conception of the legitimate basis for political interference, and the resolution was the harm principle.

For Frege one problem was how 'the evening star = the evening star' could be trivially true, when the 'evening star = the morning star' is not, and the resolution is the sense-reference distinction.

The general philosophical literature also employs a number of types of philosophical resolution. We can resolve philosophical problems by identifying a problematic conception, which we then eliminate, reduce to unproblematic conceptions, or use only instrumentally. Alternatively we can resolve these problems by coining new concepts<sup>11</sup>, or simply by ceasing theorisation.<sup>12</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

Philosophy should be understood as seeking resolutions to problems, rather than Settled, definitive conclusions. This problem-resolution conception of philosophy acknowledges the achievements of philosophy as progress and explains why philosophy is a worthwhile endeavour, even though no philosophical position finds general or lasting agreement, and every position is only one of many legitimate options. We make progress primarily by identifying philosophical problems and then transforming our conceptions to resolve these problems. This is progress even though there are other options and even though we are liable to revise, refine or reject our resolutions in the future. However, we also make progress by discovering new, more refined and sophisticated problems and resolutions, and moving to conceptions which, compared with the alternatives, resolve more of the currently identified philosophical problems, are in greater reflective equilibrium with the total set of our rational considerations, and raise more new but productive problems. Although this will never be simple or straightforward, we can judge philosophical progress by asking: Does our new conception remove the problem involved in the old conception? Does our new conception remove other philosophical problems that alternatives do not? Does our resolution lead to new, unexamined problems, that when addressed, will lead to the development of even more adequate and congruous conceptions? Furthermore, we make philosophical progress as we reach milestones on the path to resolving philosophical problems such as asking questions, devising arguments, and revising resolutions.

*Postscript: The back door is left open for idealistic and pessimistic positions*

Having presented the problem-resolution conception of philosophy and the realistic view of philosophical progress that it supports, I can now return to idealistic and pessimistic positions about philosophical progress.

Initially I rejected the idealistic position that philosophy is the search for truth and the pessimistic position that philosophy produces nothing more than an expression of our subjective temperaments, or of historical and sociological forces. However, given the problem-resolution conception does not allow me to claim that these positions are false, and given these are potentially legitimate, defensible metaphilosophical positions that have been held by respectable philosophers, I now want to open a back-door to allow the possibility of their return.

I still argue that the realistic position taken by the problem-resolution conception of philosophical progress is better than idealistic or pessimistic conceptions. However, from the perspective of the problem-resolution conception, and using the style of reasoning advocated to resolve philosophical problems, we might reach an idealistic or pessimistic conclusion. If an idealistic or pessimistic metaphilosophical position were shown to resolve particular metaphilosophical problems, or to be in greater reflective equilibrium than alternative resolutions, then it would be a defensible position to take. Thus we might have first order-pluralism and the problem-resolution conception of philosophy, but from this position we could also develop a second-order philosophical idealistic or pessimistic position.

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<sup>1</sup> There is scant literature on philosophical progress, and much of this merely discusses whether the discipline has made progress rather than attempting to conceptualise philosophical progress, as I do in this paper. The few articles written about progress in philosophy include: Lovejoy, 1917a, 1917b; Urban, 1926; Quine, 1970; Rapaport, 1982; Moody, 1986; Neilsen, 1987; Dombrowski, 1994; and Campbell, 2003. Various books with a metaphilosophical bent also examine philosophical progress, such as Nelson (1962), Rorty (1998), and Rescher (1985, 2006), but these are as infrequent as the papers.

<sup>2</sup> It is ambiguous how we should classify metaphilosophical positions such as Rorty's view of philosophy as an edifying discourse. In some ways it seems pessimistic about epistemic philosophical progress because it implies that the most philosophy can achieve is to carry on an edifying conversation. However, because Rorty sees "edification" as the "project of finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking" (1979, 360), this position may be more realistic than pessimistic. If edification leads to *epistemically* better ways of speaking, then this is a realistic position,

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but if they are merely *socially* or *aesthetically* better ways of speaking, then it is pessimistic.

<sup>3</sup> This should be distinguished from logical positivism where empirical problems are the only real problems, and so-called philosophical problems are merely conceptual confusions.

<sup>4</sup> I argue that philosophical problems are essentially problematic conceptions, but not always exclusively, as they may also involve non-conceptual elements such as an *experience* of doubt and discomfort. Others, especially of an ethical nature, involve *emotional* dissonance. For example, the philosophical problem of vegetarianism may involve disgust about the treatment of animals raised for food.

<sup>5</sup> There are also non-philosophical problems associated with problematic ethical conceptions. For example, the problem of how to overcome our weakness of will about taking bribes or about eating meat when we are convinced by the arguments against bribery or for vegetarianism.

<sup>6</sup> Like Collingwood (2005) and Rescher (1978, 2006), I argue that the unSettleability of philosophical problems is a necessary feature of philosophy. This is also an implication of the view that “as soon as definite knowledge concerning any subject becomes possible, this subject ceases to be called philosophy, and becomes a separate science” (Russell, 1998, 90).

<sup>7</sup> Ryle (1971, 160) argues for such a transformational view of philosophical resolutions. He writes: “A philosopher’s genius lies not in his giving one new answer to one old question, but in his transforming all the questions. He gives mankind a different air to breathe.”

<sup>8</sup> Although reflective equilibrium was most famously employed by Rawls (1971), it can be traced back at least to William James: “The individual has a stock of old opinions already, but he meets a new experience that puts them to a strain. Somebody contradicts them; or in a reflective moment he discovers that they contradict each other; or he hears of facts with which they are incompatible; or desires arise in him which they cease to satisfy. The result is an inward trouble to which his mind till then had become a stranger, and from which he seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions. He saves as much of it as he can, for in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives. So he tries to change first this opinion, and then that (for they resist change very variously), until at last some new idea comes up which he can graft upon the stock with a minimum of disturbance of the latter, some idea that mediates between the stock and the new experience and runs them into one another most felicitously and expediently” (1912, 59-60).



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<sup>9</sup> To distinguish this kind of justification from that of the (impossible) certain proof, Dewey calls it being “warranted” (1938), Rescher calls it being “worthy of acceptance” (2006, 13), and Putnam, “rationally acceptable” (1981).

<sup>10</sup> I leave it an open question whether: 1) there are perennial philosophical problems which we are obliged to return to again and again in ever more sophisticated ways such as truth, justice and freedom (which is the position that Rescher is inclined towards); or 2) whether the old problems and resolutions are now obsolete, surpassed, and should be forgotten because the conceptions associated with them cause our current incongruities and inadequacies (which is the position that Rorty and Wittgenstein espouse). However, even if the past problems and resolutions are the source of current philosophical problems, each individual may still have to work through these ‘obsolete’ problems and resolutions so they can understand the current state of play in philosophy.

<sup>11</sup> See Deleuze and Guattari’s (1994, 2) view of philosophy as “the art of forming, inventing and fabricating concepts.”

<sup>12</sup> Some examples of these types of resolution from the philosophy of mind are as follows: The Churchlands eliminate ‘mind’ (1981, 1986), while Fodor reduces it to a language of thought (1975) and Dennett (1987) employs it only instrumentally according to the intentional stance. Brentano coins the new concept of ‘intentionality’ to make sense of the conscious mind (1874); and Ayer (1959) and the logical positivists argue that the way to resolve the problems about ‘mind’ is to stop creating theories, thus endorsing a quietist or minimalist position. See Blackburn (2006, ch5) for an alternative list of types of resolution to the philosophical problem of truth.